

**The First Eight Hours:
Emergency Communication Response and Action Following Organizational Crisis
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The Calgary Emergency Management Agency (CEMA) asks the following questions for undergraduate students to help assess best practices in contemporary crisis communication:

What does the emergency communication ‘clock’ look like related to communicating with the public during an emergency/disaster? What actions and tasks need to be completed to ensure stakeholders are informed and can take required actions? What are the best practices and key activities that need to be completed within the first eight hours following an emergency/disaster and why do they need to occur? In addition, are there organizations outside of Calgary that have done this well/poorly and what were the repercussions?

To answer these questions, this paper compares studies, data and responses from the Thai Department of Disease Control (DDC) case study (Hinjoy et al., 2020) to offer recommendations for effective organizational emergency communication within the first eight hours of a crisis. In particular, the work of Li (2007), Lyon and Cameron (2004), and Wang and Zhuang (2017) is used to help identify key recommendations for contemporary crisis communication practices.

Review of the Literature

Timeliness of risk communication is an essential piece to the success of a public crisis response that ensures stakeholders are informed and prepared to take required action. The following literature review analyzes studies associated with timely emergency response, as well

as the actions and tasks that follow. In order to examine the dynamic scope of framing during rapidly developing crisis stages, the literature review summarizes the work of Li (2007).

The literature review then summarizes the work of Lyon and Cameron (2004) to better understand successful first-responses in crisis situations by organizations and their effects on the attitudes and behaviours of audiences. Additionally, the literature review covers work from Wang and Zhuang (2017) to examine information distribution of official users during disasters and the efficiency and reach of crisis communication on social media platforms.

Li (2007) examined television framing from five United States (U.S.) outlets (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and FOX News) covering the first 24 hours after the September 11 attack on the world trade center. The author conducted a content analysis to determine how each crisis stage affected the framing within the rapidly changing events. Within the first 24 hours, 2,647 stories were identified including 745 stories from ABC, 612 from CBS, 427 from NSC, 657 from CNN, and 206 from FOX News (Li, 2007). From this analysis, Li (2007) found that media frames adapted from descriptive (8:45 a.m. to 11 a.m.), to attributive (11 a.m. to 3 p.m.), to affective (3 p.m. to 7 p.m.), over the course of the crisis stages following the event. In addition, they found that stories in the first crisis stage shared more unified facts and frames while political and criminal frames increased as the crisis evolved. Li also found that television outlets primarily served as an information source rather than a guiding or consoling source during the first 24 hours of coverage, with 81 per cent of stories presenting facts over the three crisis stages (Li, 2007).

Authors Lyon and Cameron (2004) conducted a study to assess two factors of crisis communication: defensive and apologetic responses to crisis and the effects of good and bad reputation. The researchers asked 80 participants to complete a questionnaire on four fictional

crisis stories (Lyon & Cameron, 2004). Two versions of each story were crafted, one in which a key figure of the company issued a defensive response to the negative issue, and one in which a key figure of the company issued an apologetic response to the negative issue. In addition, four reputational paragraphs were written, two paragraphs were about a company with a good reputation and two were about a company with a poor reputation. To measure, the authors examined attitude formation and change, behavioural intentions in the short and long term, and immediate and delayed source credibility assessments.

Results showed that participants were more likely to purchase and invest in an organization with good reputation than one with bad reputation. As well, participants were more likely to purchase and invest in an organization with an apologetic response than one with a defensive response. More notably, participants retained their original impressions and judgements of the organization, enough to make subsequent decisions following their crisis response. The authors note that people most often remember their initial conclusions about the organization, making it crucial that the first response is executed strategically. It is concluded that subtle variations of crisis response messages can produce dramatically different effects on attitudes and behaviours.

Authors Wang and Zhuang (2017) conducted a study of information distribution and coverage on social media following Hurricane Sandy. The authors conducted a content analysis of 986,579 tweets from October 22 to November 6, 2012 including 163 governmental organizations (GO), 31 non-governmental organizations (NGO) and 276 news agent accounts (Wang & Zhuang, 2017). Variables for the study included five social media performance measures including impression, like, mention, re-tweet, and response time, and other variables such as hashtag, tweet frequency, and information type among different user types. The authors

found that news agents generated the largest amount of total impressions and tweeted more frequently than GO and NGO users. In relation to time and distribution, nearly 67 per cent of retweets occurred within one hour of the incident, which showed efficiency in information distribution among social media (Wang & Zhuang, 2017). However, the average time for retweets was longer than 27 hours which suggests that the distribution of stories can occur fairly long after the original tweet is released (Wang & Zhuang, 2017). The impression variable results showed that one retweet could contribute to an average of 7637 impressions (Wang & Zhuang, 2017).

Case Study of the Thai Department of Disease Control's Communication for International Response to COVID-19

In January 2020, the Thailand Department of Disease Control (DDC), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the ASEAN Health Cluster were met with COVID-19 as an international health crisis (Hinjoy et al., 2020). Measures to stop the outbreak required international coordination with activities such as sharing and collecting information, providing documents, releasing press releases and preparing information for public dissemination, all at rapid speeds. Looking back on the early phases of the COVID-19 health emergency, this case study assesses the speed and effectiveness of the DDC's international communication response.

The Thailand Department of Disease Control's communication letters and messages addressing COVID-19 were reviewed to measure the timeliness of the types of responses, dates of notifications and dates of responses (Hinjoy et al., 2020). As well, the frequency and duration between release times of assignments were measured in minutes and hours to further explore their efficiency in the midst of crisis. Results showed that within 30 minutes of receiving laboratory confirmation of the first COVID-19 case in Thailand, the Thailand WHO country

office was notified (Hinjoy et al., 2020). According to Hinjoy et al. (2020), when measuring the entirety of the crisis response, the “minimum and maximum response times ranged from 22.2 minutes to 43.40 hours and the median duration was 2.49 hours” (p. 208).

Public messages distributing knowledge including flyers, infographics in different languages, social media posts in different languages and website updates for the DDC were all effectively circulated in a means of “3.4 hours” (p. 208). A total of 15 press releases and news correspondence were released within a longer period of “9.18 hours” (p. 208). In addition, 17 English daily situation reports were produced and uploaded onto the DDC’s official website with a time of “13.55 hours” (p. 208). In respect to communication time, specifically duration between assignment and release time (see Appendix A), Hinjoy et al. state that “it was evident that the DDC values rapid communication and dissemination of information” (p. 209).

However, Hinjoy et al. identified two areas that showed the need for improvement: “Nominate epidemic spokesperson at international level” and “Have good relations with professional specialists able to help with the development of accurate and timely messages” (p. 209). During Thailand’s initial response to the COVID-19 outbreak, no English-speaking spokesperson was identified, leaving a gap in international communication. Hinjoy et al. note that it is “essential to stay on top of the information flow and to maintain close coordination with other agencies with spokespersons” (p. 209). It was also suggested that some documents took longer to produce and may have been attributed to an “available, yet limited, English writing capacity and the time the approval process took” (p. 209). Despite these challenges, the overall communication capacities and rapid response performed by the DDC expressed a commitment to “transparency, sharing information from trusted sources before fake news sources create

misinformation, and willingness to collaborate with a variety of international partners for the benefit of global health” (p. 209).

Findings and Recommendations

The most notable theme among the research and case study was the need for responding quickly. According to Coombs (2021), “the need for speed in crisis communication continues to escalate as technology accelerates the spread of information, thereby actually reducing the amount of time a crisis team has for responding” (p. 156). The communication ‘clock’ so to speak becomes more limited as information spreads online. The high stakes within the first hours of a crisis are outlined in Stenbøg’s 2019 article, where he breaks down the steps needed to mitigate a crisis in a time-restrained lens, working to reduce risk and damage. He suggests that the first hour mark becomes a priority for communication, understanding the facts and foundation of the crisis, as well as analyzing the immediate needs both internally and externally (Stenbøg, 2019). Coombs (2021) backs this up by stating that some experts “subscribe to a one-hour rule when providing the initial crisis response” (p. 156).

We can also see this practiced in the Thailand DDC case study; within the first hours of the declared emergency, the Thailand Department of Disease Control was able to release information to the public both locally and internationally. Considering the scope of the crisis, the Thailand Department of Disease Control’s response time was impressive and effective.

Another key finding was that the stage and timeframe of the crisis have an effect on media function. Coombs (2021) states that media are going to report on a crisis; therefore, “if the crisis team does not supply the initial crisis information to the media, some other groups will, and they may be ill informed, misinformed, or motivated to harm the organization” (p. 157). Controlling the narrative on media channels is difficult as the crisis stages play out and more

channels pick up the story. For example, Li (2007) notes that stories following the 9/11 incident in the first stage of the crisis shared more unified facts and frames while political and criminal frames increased as the crisis evolved. To prevent faulty narratives in media function, Coombs (2021) suggests speaking with one voice to ensure consistency. He says, “speaking with one voice means coordinating the efforts of the official spokespersons and keeping potential employee ambassadors (unofficial spokespersons) informed” (p. 159). Taken together, it is recommended that organizations report quickly on the crisis, while keeping consistency through the one voice approach.

Lastly, there are key activities that need to be performed within the first hours of a crisis. According to Long (2018), the first key activity when faced with a crisis is planning priorities. Understanding what measures are at risk is key to moving forward with the next steps of action. Examples of this may include addressing a safety risk, informing the public on their required action, or releasing a statement on the issue. Similarly, Coombs (2021) states that “the top objective for crisis communication should be to prevent harm to stakeholders. Crisis teams must ensure the physical safety and psychological well-being of stakeholders affected by the crisis” (p. 165). Once priorities are set, communicating with the target audience is required. Coombs continues to note that channel selection is critical, and that “every crisis communication effort will demand the use of multiple channels and platforms because of the need to reach a variety of stakeholders both external and internal to the organization” (p. 168).

An example of this can be seen in the Thailand DDC case, as officials were able to communicate with the public through physical and digital channels within the first few hours of the health emergency to guide their next steps. In addition, deciding what approach to take when making a statement regarding a crisis can influence the public’s attitudes and perceptions. From

Lyon and Cameron's (2004) study, participants retained their original impressions and judgements of the organization, enough to make subsequent decisions following their crisis response. The authors also highlight that people most often remember their initial conclusions about the organization, making it crucial that the first response is executed strategically.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research and case study suggest the need for quick and strategic responding within the first eight hours of a crisis. Understanding the speed in which information is circulated digitally requires fast response from the organization. The Thailand DDC case exemplifies quick responding done well, as they were able to communicate with key stakeholders both locally and internationally in a matter of hours. In addition, controlling the narrative through consistency in messages proved to be a key factor considering the role of media and social media during a crisis. Planning priorities of action with stakeholders' safety and well-being in mind should be the first course of action following a crisis. As well, knowing where and how to reach key stakeholders to effectively communicate the crisis and inform them on their required action. Lastly, understanding what response approaches will result in the most positive public attitudes, perceptions and outcomes will aid in the smoothest roll-out within the first hours of a crisis.

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Appendix A

**Timeliness of communication as an international response during the reporting of
COVID-19 cases in Thailand, 2019 (Hinjoy et al., 2020, p. 208)**

No.	Categories	Frequency	Duration between assignment times and release time (hrs.) (Minimum - Maximum)	Mean (Median) duration (hrs.) ± Standard Deviations
1	Duties of International Health Regulation (IHR) focal point			
	on article 6 (Notification)	1	0.50	
	on article 44 (Collaboration and assistance)	11	0.37-43.40	13.41 ± 18.82 2.49 (Median)
2	Press release/News	15	4.56-12.97	9.18 ± 6.19
3	Daily situation report	17	3.93-23.03	13.55 ± 6.81
4	Risk communication (knowledge)	9	2.67 - 4.18	3.43 ± 1.07